

HONOURING THE MEMORY OF CHHOTE SAHIBZADE

Pritam Singh

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At the end of month of December every year, the global Sikh community honours the memory of the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh, affectionately called Chhote Sahibzade, who were martyred at a very young age. The younger, Fateh Singh, born on 25 February 1699, was not even seven when he was martyred on 12 December 1705 along with his elder brother Zorawar Singh, born on 17 November 1696, who had just turned nine. As childhood in all cultures is associated with innocence and purity, the story of children as young as the two Sahibzadas being subjected to brutal torture leading to death is one of the most painful memories in Sikh history.

When we reflect on the martyrdom of the two Sahibzadas, several aspects of human history and human character come to mind. First let us look at some aspects of human history. Throughout history, there has been a struggle between on one hand those who are in power and use that power to commit atrocities on those whom they consider as their opponents, and on the other, those who stand for the dignity of human freedom and are willing even to give their life for their faith and beliefs. In some accounts, this is described as the perpetual conflict between evil and good. In this case, Wazir Khan, the faujdar (Governor)



Haveli Todar Mal, Fatehgarh Sahib district, Punjab, India

of Sirhind, represented evil and the two Sahibzadas represented good. Those who are in a position of power are often only able to recognise the exercise of their power by inflicting pain on those they consider as a threat – real, potential or imaginary – to their power. In some cases, the powerful are so deranged by their power that they turn sadistic – they enjoy inflicting pain on others. There are several accounts of prisoners or persons in police or army custody who are no threat to their captors, but who are subjected to inhuman torture by prison officers or police or army personnel for sheer sadistic pleasure. Those who are in power feel momentarily victorious, but in the long run humanity recognises those who withstand torture for their beliefs and relegates the torturers to the dustbin of history. Who now remembers Wazir Khan or the Qazi who was at first reluctant to pronounce a guilty verdict on the Sahibzadas because, according to his understanding of Islamic law the boys were not guilty of any crime, but then succumbed to pressure from Wazir Khan and ordered the execution of the Sahibzadas by walling them up alive? We do not know if there are any descendants of Wazir Khan or the Qazi, but if there were, they would be ashamed of their association with them. On the contrary, the Sahibzadas are remembered with love, admiration, reverence and inspiration by millions, and they will continue to be remembered this way. A broad lesson of history is that evil may win momentarily but good will triumph in the end.

Let us now look at several aspects of the human character. Let us first reflect on the conduct of the Sahibzadas who, even at that young age, scaled the heights of wisdom, bravery, steadfastness and unshakeable faith. They were obviously conscious of the great



Bhora Sahib, the sanctum remembering the spot where two sons of Guru Gobind Singh were buried alive.

tradition set by their grandfather Guru Tegh Bahadur, who had given his life to defend the religious human rights of his ideological opponents, the Kashmiri Brahmins. It is not difficult to imagine that they were educated about their family history and the high traditions of their faith by their grandmother, Mata Gujari, who would have taught them about the absolute necessity of remaining firm in their belief, and that remaining true to one's faith, even if it meant giving one's life, was better than abandoning faith for mere physical survival. They were

young in age but mature in their understanding of their historic role. This also tells us that although there are physical and biological limits associated with age, these limits are flexible. Someone can be young but also incredibly wise and brave, while another person can be mature in age but infantile in behaviour and character.

One can imagine the immeasurable pain felt by Guru Gobind Singh when he heard the news about the two Sahibzadas being tortured to death. And it is here that Guru Gobind Singh rises to those heights of character



Backview of the entrance gateway to the Fatehgarh Sahib Gurdwaras complex, Punjab

rarely ever witnessed in human history. There was not a single instance in his life where he either retaliated himself by harming an uninvolved Muslim civilian or hinted about the need to retaliate in this way to any of his followers. There must have been an explosion of anger amongst his followers against Wazir Khan, but the high moral values the Guru had inculcated among his Sikhs acted as a powerful constraint against any unethical retaliatory behaviour against the family or relatives of Wazir Khan. Wazir Khan himself was punished but on a battlefield. When Banda Bahadur led the attack on Sirhind in 1710, one of his commanders, also named Fateh Singh, killed Wazir Khan in one of the battles.

Along with Wazir Khan and the Qazi, the most shameful conduct in this gruesome tragedy belonged to Diwan Sucha Nand, a Hindu Brahmin.

Sucha Nand was a minister in the court of Wazir Khan. To show his utmost loyalty to Wazir Khan, Diwan Sucha Nand convinced Wazir Khan, when he hesitated to punishing the Sahibzadas, that he should show no mercy to the children of Guru Gobind Singh. He argued with Khan that if the Sahibzadas were left free, they would grow up to become powerful opponents of the Mughal regime.

Even in the most hateful regimes, there are individuals who respond to the voice of their conscience. One such individual was Sher Mohammad Khan, the Nawab of Malerkotla, who protested the death sentence pronounced on the young Sahibzadas in spite of the fact that his brother had been killed by Guru Gobind Singh's forces. He argued that his brother had died in a battlefield but that the young Sahibzadas were totally innocent. That one brave act of kindness by the

Nawab of Malerkotla has earned him a high place in history, and it is good that the Sikh community has never forgotten his humane intervention.

Then there is the despicable character of Gangu Brahmin who had served the Guru's family for decades and who, at a crucial moment when Mata Gujri and the Sahibzadas took refuge in his house at his own request, then betrayed them to the local police leading to their arrest. His character shows how greed can lead human beings to the act of betrayal.

In contrast with Gangu Brahmin's act of betrayal was the act of deep loyalty of Baba Moti Ram Mehra, who displayed an exemplary character. He arranged to serve milk to Mata Gujari and the Sahibzadas in the Thanda Burj (Cold Fort) where they were imprisoned. When Wazir Khan discovered this, he ordered his arrest along with that of his mother, wife and very young son.

Moti Ram Mehra defended his action as morally correct, for which he along with whole family was tortured to death. Similarly praiseworthy was Diwan Todar Mal, who bought the land on which to cremate the bodies of Mata Gujari and the Sahibzadas with gold coins. There are two beautiful gurdwaras in the memory of Baba Moti Ram Mehra and Diwan Todar Mal in the town of Fatehgarh Sahib where the two Sahibzadas were martyred. In our memory and historical texts, Wazir Khan, the Qazi, Diwan Sucha Nand and Gangu Brahmin are treated with contempt while we honour the young Sahibzadas and also the Nawab of Malerkotla, Baba Moti Ram Mehra and Diwan Todar Mal.

(The writer is Professor Emeritus of Economics, Oxford Brookes University), UK